

Northcliffe, Newspaper Genius and Magnate, at Close Range



LORD NORTHCLEFFE
BRITAIN'S FOREMOST NEWSPAPER OWNER

Retiring Master of Carmelite House
Kept Track of Least Detail—His
"London Times" Successor

By FRANK DILNOT.

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LORD NORTHCLEFFE, whose retirement from the chairmanship of his various papers is reported, is not only one of the notable public figures of the world to-day, but also one of the great personalities. I have worked for him. I do not agree with all his policies. There may have been here and there groundwork for the bitter and persistent criticism leveled against him from one quarter or another, but the fact remains, when all is said and done, that he is a generous big man, sincere in his advocacy, one whose magnetism impresses friend and foe alike, and a fascinating human study.

It is not the millions of pounds he has amassed that makes him so interesting, but the mysterious and uncanny qualities of the man. He is ruthless. He is hated with ferocious intensity for much of his public work. And yet I can never persuade myself that those who assail him most strongly have ever been in close contact with him personally. There would be something lacking from their intensity of feeling if they had. The odd thing is you cannot help liking Northcliffe himself, however much you may disagree with his policies. And, after all, personality is at least as important as doctrines.

Began in Early Life With Paper.

There are current many variations of the story of how he began, boy of 17, as a contributor, and while he was still in the "teenie" ran a small paper in Coventry, the home of the cycle industry, to take advantage of the boom in cycles, then at its height. He began really to emerge as the publisher of a little weekly paper called *Answers* when he was just over 20, and that was when he first swung into my schoolboy life. They tell how he used to help put the papers into trolleys. Whether that is true or not I do not know, but he had two tiny rooms with his brother Harold on the top floor of a city building as his office, and there was no end to his energy, mental or physical.

It is told how he went around to all the principal news agents urging the sale of his journal. Some of this may be apocryphal, but it fits in with his temperament, as will be revealed later on the audacious acquisition of the moribund *Evening News* of London, his swift success with it, his still more audacious plunge with the *Daily Mail*, his phenomenal triumph, and his expansion of his ownership until he had two or three score of papers of all kinds, led by the famous *London Times*, are part and parcel of his story.

The remarkable thing was that all was done in conservative England while he was still a young man. He is even now, on his retirement, not far advanced in the 50s.

Tribute From One Worker.

I was several years on the staff of the *Daily Mail* and at intervals saw a good deal of Lord Northcliffe, or rather Alfred Harmsworth, as he was when I first came in touch with him. Right here I would like to say this tribute to one of the biggest men of the country, you see all there is to be seen and are at the hub of life all the time. I could not buy such a life however much I wished to.

He used to smoke big, flat cigarettes. He encouraged the reporter to talk as frankly and openly with him as they would among themselves. That was one of his secrets. To his subordinates he was always accessible, and could be quite kindly in rejecting a suggestion from a subordinate; on the other side, never a man more generous in his thanks than when he accepted one, which happened frequently.

There was another side to him, of course, but the chiefs knew it better than the rank and file. He came into the reporters' room one day, exchanged a quick, genial, impetuous

word with the chief reporter and then as his eye flashed round the room he saw on the notice board above the mantel a hasty pencil sketch of himself, exaggerating some of his features. "Who did this?" he exclaimed, and as the room did not know whether he was joking or not there was silence as every one bent to their work. He borrowed a pencil from me and wrote beneath it, "Please don't libel me." There was a twinkle in his eye.

Let a reporter or a subeditor fail ill or become "run down" and he would not only be provided with medical attendance, but would, if the case necessitated it, be sent to a suitable climate abroad for months at a time in order to recuperate, entirely at the firm's expense. I remember one reporter who became secretary for a time, and Northcliffe, or "Alfred," as he was known behind his back, burst into his room one morning and flinging a glance at the man said, "You look unwell; you want a holiday. Go at once."

Overrode Secretary's Protest.

His secretary protested he was all right. "I know what it is," said the chief acidly. "You are like all the other young men here. You spend your salary as you get it and now you have no money to go away."

He cut the matter short by drawing a check for \$50, and handing it to the secretary told him to leave for a holiday the next day. One is often asked what Lord Northcliffe is like to look at. Picture a squarely built man, heavy in the shoulders, who always walks quickly with short steps; a man with a head at once massive and boyish, with a great square forehead, over which a lock of hair drops pendulously—Bismarckian chin, a big mouth, which sinks at the corners, an aquiline, well formed nose, wide open eyes, which hide instead of betraying thoughts and passions. There he is, externally.

Yet the description conveys little.

It is mood which gives him his wonderful variety. At all times energy flickers from him like lightning, but nevertheless he is an entirely different man on different occasions. See him in attack. Head sunk deep in the shoulders, brows lowered, he scatters nimble words which sear and burn. With all the impetuosity of a schoolboy he pours forth truths that never fail to scarify or destroy. Ruthless and merciless in his onslaughts, he is a man of words which sear and burn. With all the impetuosity of a schoolboy he pours forth truths that never fail to scarify or destroy.

Inspired All With Devotion.

Is it possible for the reader to reconcile this picture with the fact that Alfred Harmsworth has inspired his employees not merely with enthusiasm, but with devotion, and that most of those who have been in closest relation with him have felt the touch of affection?

I think that one of the secrets of Lord Northcliffe's success has been his extraordinary power of concentration. As the controller and business manager of journalistic businesses worth in the aggregate tens of millions of dollars, he would often and regularly fasten on some weak point in one or other of his papers, and devote himself, possibly for days and practically to the exclusion of everything else, until he had remedied matters.

Or an idea would strike him for, say, the *Daily Mail*, or one of his other dailies, or one of his magazines, and he would throw himself wholeheartedly into it, gather around him the best brains at his disposal and never stop his efforts until he had achieved success.

"Perfectly comfortable in the sub-editor's room?"

"Yes, quite."

"How long have you been with me?"

"About three months, now."

"Do you find it easy to work with the chief subeditor?"

"Yes, I like him very much."

"What money are you getting?"

"Five pounds a week."

"And you are quite happy and contented?"

"Yes."

"Then you are not the man for me. I don't want any member of my staff to be happy and contented with five pounds a week!"

It was a fashion to decry Alfred Harmsworth in his early days as a proprietor from many angles. His political sincerity was scouted by the highbrows in the other camp. His newspaper methods were called sensational, and he was assailed in regard to his system of employment; it was contended that he took men away from other newspapers, extracted what ideas he could from them and then turned them loose, unemployed, a few months later. I dare say there were individual cases such as occur in any great business, but if there is one thing in his life of which Lord Northcliffe may be justifiably proud it is his record as an employer.

Gates Open for the Ambitious.

It is true that his gates have always been open wide to ambitious young men who had any semblance of ability. And it correspondingly true that a good many of these young men when tested failed to make good and had to leave. But the majority, indeed, practically the whole lot departed, not so much because they were incapable as because on account of their temperament they were unable to fit into the scheme. Speaking generally, a young man of moderate intelligence, a strong will to succeed and with corresponding energy could always be certain of a permanent position.

Of scores, hundreds, Lord Northcliffe has made the reputation, and in some cases, the fortune. And let it be said here that the Harmsworth firm revolutionized the scale of pay for newspaper work in London; I think it can be said that it was doubled, thanks to the Harmsworth standard.

There is one story told of him which illustrates his method very well. In preface I should say that in that great office building of Carmelite House there are so many employees that it is impossible for an employer to know them all personally, except such as

have been in the establishment a considerable time. Harmsworth was always curious about new faces. One morning mounting the stairs to his private suite he encountered a young man coming down. Harmsworth stopped.

"Who are you?" he said quickly.

"My name is Brown. I am in the reporters' room."

"Brown," said the chief, frowning reflectively. "You wrote that article this morning on page six, column two—Do I know you?"

"Yes," said the young reporter. "Very badly done. If you cannot do any better than that you are no good to this firm."

Surprise for a Reporter.

The young reporter felt that his career was at an end. As a matter of fact he heard nothing more from his story. It was just one of those incidental criticisms, mixed with praise, which continually emanated from Harmsworth and kept the whole establishment at concert pitch. Three months later the young reporter again met Harmsworth, and again the chief stopped him. With his usual swift speech he said: "You are Brown."

The reporter acknowledged the indictment. "You wrote that article this morning on page 5, column 2—Do I know you?"

"Yes," said the young reporter. "Very badly done. If you cannot do any better than that you are no good to this firm."

Fearful of what was coming, the reporter owned that the article was his.

"Very well done, indeed," said Harmsworth. "An excellent article. It brightened the whole paper. It was by far the best thing of the morning. You are doing extremely well, and I am very well pleased with your work. How long have you been with me now?"

"Four months."

"How much money are you getting?"

"Eight pounds after this week."

"Eight pounds, moving off rapidly to his room."

With regard to his newspaper and business methods which old-fashioned people were at first inclined to sneer at, it can be said that they have proved successful to the last degree. Everything he has touched has turned to money. Now and again he has made a mistake, but these mistakes have probably not amounted to more than 1 per cent. of the cases in which his commercial judgment was absolutely right.

When I first went to the *Daily Mail*, I, together with other outsiders, attributed much of his success to sheer luck, combined with audacity and the impetus of a fortunate start. Perhaps, too, there was an inclination to attach importance to the suggestion that Harmsworth's success was due partly to his knack of getting good men around him—that his lieutenants really provided all the brains and general capacity. Of course, he had clever men around him, but the fact remains that it was the genius of the man at the top which first stimulated and then welded their efforts into a unit of success.

We reporters, in the early stages, used very often to doubt his judgment on routine newspaper matters. To feel that some of his ideas were against all the chances of success. As time went on, it grew upon one that he had an almost uncanny vision, that

his most unlikely projects were certain of coming off. He had, so to speak, a mysterious second sight. Afterward we all grew to have an almost religious faith in suggestions which he put forward. It seemed impossible that they should fail. They rarely did.

There were a thousand facets to what I may call his newspaper personality, but every one of them gave an illumination to the whole. I used to hear, at second hand of course, as a young reporter, that every story, if possible, must be told in the first sentence; that one must always remember that no political party in Britain was overwhelmingly predominant; that fact was always more important than adornment; that humor in news stories should be avoided like the

plague; that women were important, possibly the most important, readers of any popular newspaper.

All this only goes to show that Harmsworth was an intuitive judge of human nature. He did what seemed extraordinary things sometimes. For instance, he would ask a cabman after a substantial tip what he thought the most interesting item in the *Daily Mail* that morning. That cabman's judgment would be unfailingly reproduced at points within twenty-four hours. He would give a substantial money prize to the person in the establishment who made the best suggestion or comment about the *Daily Mail* during the current week. One of the messenger boys was as likely to win the prize as any one else.

One word about the moral character of the Harmsworth publications. In the storm of popularity and abuse with which Alfred Harmsworth has always been encircled one rarely or never hears a tribute which should credit him with the highest of virtues.

I had ten years' experience with the Harmsworth firm. I can remember no more deadly sin than the publication of a sentence or a word which sensationally pandered to sexual instinct. This is a tribute, I think, to the whole of the British press, but it certainly is a tribute to Northcliffe. A thousand times has a story been cut down or suppressed because of its debased appeal. Whatever else may be urged against the Northcliffe papers they were absolutely clean. Sometimes their contents might be considered trivial, frequently a partisan might consider them erroneous, but never was there anything in them to sully the minds of the young.

Against Humorous Comment.

I referred just now to an objection to humor in the daily news; humor, that is to say, in the shape of comment. That does not mean to imply that Northcliffe himself was without humor. He could be playful when the occasion required. One day Northcliffe noticed a news item in the evening papers to the effect that in one of the country districts not far from London an automobile speeding at a high rate had knocked down and killed a village child, and had raced on its way to avoid detection. Northcliffe determined to turn on the searchlight of the *Daily Mail*. The senior reporter was sent down to the district with instructions to spare neither money nor effort to find the automobile and its owner.

The local police had done their best but their best was unsuccessful. For three days the reporter with various assistants labored over a radius of fifty miles. Meanwhile the *Daily Mail*, which gave great prominence to the story, offered a reward of 100 pounds for the discovery of the car.

The reporter was successful. He obtained a description which within a few hours afterward led to the identification of the car. It was not the *Daily Mail* but more Fleet street



THE "TIMES" OFFICE.
THE HOME OF THE FAMOUS "THUNDERER."

papers which gave big headlines to the discovery, for it was none other than Northcliffe's brother, Hildebrand Harmsworth, who was the owner of the car. Hildebrand Harmsworth himself had nothing to do with the affair. His foreign chauffeur had taken the car out without the owner's knowledge for a joy ride, and in the course of his hunt had run over the child and then sought to escape detection.

It may be stated that the owner of the car made generous distributions and gave the child's parents a pension for life. But the point of the story comes afterward. A sensational crime mystery, involving the murder of a pretty young woman in a railway tunnel, occupied the attention of a large part of the editorial staff of the *Daily Mail* a few weeks later. All kinds of efforts were made to discover the criminal. Many suggestions were forthcoming.

Comment on the Reward.

In the course of the search one of the periodical editorial councils was held at Carmelite House. Presently some one put forward the proposal that £100 reward should be given for information leading to an elucidation of the mystery. "One hundred pounds reward," said Northcliffe thoughtfully. "Yes, but where was my brother Hildebrand on that night?"

Thomas Marlowe, who is slated to succeed Lord Northcliffe in the chairmanship of the *Daily Mail* and associated newspapers, has been the editor of the *Daily Mail* for twenty years or thereabouts. He was thus one of the early collaborators with A. Harmsworth. A young reporter in Fleet street, he became a member of the staff of the *Evening News* in those days when the brothers Harmsworth were building it into a valuable property. He was a forceful Irishman of distinguished presence and tremendous will power. He was quickly picked up as a man of promise and placed on the *Daily Mail*, and went from one big position to another within a period of months.

Within a very short time he was managing editor, which in London means the controller of the whole paper from top to bottom. Naturally Alfred Harmsworth remained the presiding genius, as any life owner will do. It should be said, however, that Tom Marlowe, as he was affectionately called, was not the person to remain a cipher; and indeed no such person would have remained long in authority under Harmsworth. His powers were distributed, and he used them to the fullest advantage.

Has Same Bigness of Mind.

He is a man of courage and with much of the bigness of mind and spirit that characterized Northcliffe himself. He is not soft handed with inefficiency, and has been known to use startling candor to highly placed persons whose positions might lead them to expect to be treated with special deference. But he is essentially a generous man with vision, and has this in common with Northcliffe, that no one of his staff in personal distress could find a warmer hearted friend.

One feature of his mental equipment is a transcendent common sense. He gets to the heart of a matter with disconcerting thoroughness and rapidity. He does not stop to bandy words about it either. During his long association with the paper he has been one of the strong buttresses of Northcliffe, and he on his part has gained much from his chief's genius. He is of course a master, not only of the larger problems of successful newspaper production but also of the minutiae of the daily work.

That goes without saying. What is of more interest from the human point of view is that he is a man contemptuous of littleness in every relation of life: hard headed and warm hearted. He is a born commander. He will certainly have loyal and devoted cooperation from all who have been in touch with the business or personally with himself.

Mistakes of Artists

An artist may spend time and money on a picture only to blunder in small details.

There is a story that one Royal Academician in London gave a hand five fingers beside the thumb and that another painted a live lobster bright red!

The clever Goodall had been painting a number of laborers dragging a huge stone across the desert when a man of science entered the studio. "I say, Goodall, if you want those fellows to pull that stone you must double their number. It would require just twice as many for the task!"

But it is not contemporary painters alone who slip up on points of accuracy. Even Albrecht Durer, in a painting representing Peter denying Christ, had one of the Roman soldiers in the act of smoking. Turner put a rainbow beside the sun, and in another picture got fearfully tangled up in the ship's rigging.

Col. George Harvey.

I did so, and the information was flashed that night to startled England. The consternation it caused is well remembered. I recount this incident merely to indicate the man's extraordinary prevision.

Now what if Northcliffe had not bought the *Times*? Would there be a British Empire now? Would France have been reduced to a mere satrapy? Would our own country to-day be struggling with the invader instead of with problems of reconstruction? Who can tell? Personally I have never believed for a moment that God would permit the German heel to stamp upon the neck of the world. But I am no less strongly convinced by study and observation at close range, at perhaps the most critical moment, that Northcliffe and the *Times* saved England. Neither, in my judgment, could have done it alone. The complement of the two powers of tradition and personality was essential.

In all Britain only Northcliffe was prepared. Two years, almost to a day, before Germany struck we were playing golf at Deal. I recall the

happening with peculiar distinctness. I had never beaten him before. At luncheon, speaking again after his wont as to himself, he said:

"Within three years we shall be at war."

"With Germany?"

"With Germany. She is nearly ready."

"And England?"

"Has only her navy. That is all she will have when the storm breaks. Nothing can be done."

"And the outcome?"

Northcliffe snapped back his chair with a characteristic movement, paced back and forth for a few moments, returned to his place, leaned forward and took a sip of tea and, looking up, said simply without a trace of boastfulness or excitement:

"England always wins."

To the end he never wavered for an instant in this belief. In December, 1915, I found him awaiting me at Claridge's upon my return from the Prime Minister's.

"You found things well?" he inquired.

"Certainly no sign of despair."

"No; on the contrary, satisfaction and smug complacency. Come!"

We were whizzed to the office of Lloyd George, then Minister of Munitions, whom I happened to know. Northcliffe left immediately. I remained perhaps an hour and brought away a message which I was to deliver or not, as my judgment should dictate, to the President. That evening I dined with Northcliffe. After questioning me briefly about my interview, he said:

"We are not winning the war. I do not say we are losing it yet. But we shall be soon if we go on as we are going. The one man in England who may be able to save us you have just left. If he cannot, nobody can. But he can. He must be put in full control. It will be a hard job."

It was. It took Northcliffe eleven long months to get Asquith out and Lloyd George in. As to what might have transpired if he had failed, opinions may differ. But the result stands.

Northcliffe, the savior of England, is now paying the penalty of driving a human dynamo to the limit of capacity. But he has not finished. Marvellous as have been his achievements and career, he has only begun. He is still a young man in both body and spirit. As a directive manager of multifarious affairs, he retires, yielding as he should yield to the inevitable reaction from excessive mental and physical strain. But as the most vivid personality developed by the war in civil life he will return stronger than ever. He cannot stop. Northcliffe will die with his boots on.

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